



Physical activity of prisoners of war in Oflag VII A Murnau during The Second World War

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Authors' Contribution: A – Study Design, B – Data Collection, C – Statistical Analysis, D – Manuscript Preparation, E – Funds Collection

Abstract: *Introduction:* In the Third Reich and occupied countries, the Germans established a network of POW camps. Within these camps, prisoners of war underwent basic physical activities to maintain their physical and mental well-being. Notably, one of the largest among these camps was Oflag VII A Murnau, situated in Bavaria. *Materials and Methods:* A search of archival sources stored in Polish archives, alongside analysis of available literature from specialised scientific libraries was conducted. Historical research methodologies, primarily involving source analysis and criticism, were employed. *Results:* Oflag VII A Murnau was established by the Germans on 25 September 1939, and liberated by the Allies on 29 April 1945. Throughout this duration, the camp housed over 5,000 Polish officers. To mitigate the effects of prolonged inactivity and the loss of hope for liberation, measures were taken to combat what was termed the 'barbed-wire disease.' A Department of Physical Culture was instituted within Oflag VII A, tasked with sustaining the physical fitness of the prisoners. Eight sports clubs were formed, offering instructor courses, sports-themed lectures, fitness demonstrations, and organised competitions. Among the most favoured sports were volleyball, basketball, athletics, gymnastics, football, and tennis. *Conclusions:* Despite the exceptionally challenging conditions of captivity, the prisoners of war held at Oflag VII A Murnau successfully implemented strategies to sustain their physical fitness. A significant contributing factor facilitating organised physical activities was the satisfactory state of sports facilities, due to the camp's location within former German army barracks. Equally crucial was the heightened awareness of the prisoners, many of whom were athletes, including Olympians. These individuals became the driving force behind the vibrant sports culture within Oflag VII A Murnau.

Keywords: war, POW camps, sport, Olympic Games, Olympian

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INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the Second World War disrupted the sporting activities of athletes, the activities of sports clubs, and the organisation of sports competitions. Many athletes were drafted into the military and took part in combat operations on all fronts of the war. Some lost their lives in battle, while others found themselves confined in POW camps set up by the Germans on the territories of the Third Reich and occupied countries. Initially, there were over 150 such camps for prisoners of war, categorised into offlags for officers (Offizierslager), stalags for privates and non-commissioned officers (Stammlager), marlags for Navy personnel (Marinelager), and lulags for pilots (Luftwaffenlager). Throughout the conflict, their numbers dwindled significantly as smaller temporary camps, known as dulags (Durchgangslager), were phased out in favour of larger, more permanent facilities. By the end of the war, there were 52 offlags, 80 stalags, 8 lulags, and 6 marlags in operation. [1]

After the failure of the September Campaign in 1939, Polish soldiers found themselves confined in various POW camps within the Third Reich. These camps accommodated prisoners of many nationalities, including Belgians, British, French, Dutch, Yugoslavs, Norwegians, and Serbs. In 1940, a selection process was initiated, leading to the transfer of Polish prisoners to several camps exclusively designated for them. This notably affected officers' camps, from which prisoners were relocated to Oflag II C Woldenberg, Oflag II D Gross-Born, Oflag II E Neubrandenburg, and finally, one of the largest facilities, Oflag VII A Murnau, which primarily held higher-ranking officers, among whom were approximately 30 generals. [2]

Throughout the operation of the Murnau camp, spanning from 25 September 1939 to 29 April 1945, nearly 5,500 individuals were held captive there. The prisoner population fluctuated due to transfers to other camps, releases, or fatalities. Within this large group of detainees, numerous individuals had had prior involvement in sports as athletes, coaches, instructors, or sports activists [3]. Notably, among them were eight participants of the Olympic Games from the interwar period, including boxer Walter Majchrzycki, equestrians Janusz Komorowski, Seweryn Kulesza, and Józef Trenkwald, basketball player Zenon Różycki, athlete Wacław Gąssowski, marksman Jan Suchorzewski, and fencer Marian Suski [4]. Walter Majchrzycki, who organised boxing courses for prisoners of war, Zenon Różycki, who oversaw basketball games, and Wacław Gąssowski, who managed athletics competitions [5], demonstrated exceptional dedication to promoting physical activity. However, they were not the sole contributors to the popularisation of physical exercise within the Oflag. The primary motivation behind these efforts was the imperative to maintain physical fitness and constant readiness for potential engagement in military operations, as well as to combat the pervasive 'barbed-wire disease', which in extreme cases resulted in fatalities, as prisoners, in acts of desperation, threw themselves against the electrified camp fence.

The living conditions of soldiers imprisoned in POW camps were governed by international legal acts. The Hague Convention of 1907, specifically in the *Regulations Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land*, within the chapter *On Prisoners of War*, emphasised the humane treatment of captives and outlined freedom of action within specified guidelines [6]. Similarly, the 1929 Geneva Convention Relating to the *Treatment of Prisoners of War*, binding upon signatory states, including Germany, mandated various provisions, notably *ensuring the opportunity for physical exercise* (Article 13) [7]. Despite these explicit mandates within the conventions, requiring states detaining prisoners of war to afford them decent living conditions while in captivity, forbidding the coercion of officers into labour, and stipulating the payment of remuneration to non-commissioned officers and privates performing such work, these provisions were frequently disregarded in actual wartime scenarios. Particularly during the initial stages of the war, when German forces achieved victories on both the eastern and western fronts and harboured confidence in their triumph, the conventions were often brutally violated, especially

concerning non-commissioned officers and privates [8]. Consequently, the living conditions within the camps proved to be exceedingly harsh.

The topic of German POW camps during the Second World War has not received extensive attention in scholarly literature, particularly regarding specific camps and the role of physical activity within them. However, several scientific monographs that delve into sports-related issues within offlags and stalags have been published. These include works by authors such as Juliusz Pollack, *"Jeńcy polscy w hitlerowskiej niewoli"* (Polish Prisoners in Hitler's Captivity) [1], Wojciech Półchłopek, *"Wychowanie fizyczne i sport żołnierzy polskich w obozach jenieckich Wehrmachtu i NKWD (1939–1945)"* (Physical Education and Sport of Polish Soldiers in POW camps of the Wehrmacht and the NKVD (1939–1945)) [3], Danuta Kisielewicz, *"Niewola w cieniu Alp. Oflag VII A Murnau (Captivity in the Shadow of the Alps: Oflag VII A Murnau)"* [9], Ryszard Wryk, *"Sport i wojna. Losy polskich olimpijczyków w latach drugiej wojny światowej"* (Sport and War, Fate of Polish Olympians During the Second World War) [5], Anna Matuchniak-Mystkowska, *"Sport jeniecki w Oflagach II B Arnswalde, II C Woldenberg, II D Gross-Born. Analiza socjologiczna"* (Prisoner-of-war sport in Oflag II B Arnswalde, II C Woldenberg, II D Gross Born. Sociological Analysis) [10], and numerous contributing works. The article *"Sport Polski w cieniu swastyki. Szkic historiograficzny"* (Polish Sport under The Shadow of The Swastika: A Historiographic Sketch) by Ryszard Wryk also deserves attention [11]. Although these works hold significant scholarly value, none of them primarily focuses on the physical activity of prisoners at Oflag VII A in Murnau. This may be attributed to the absence of noteworthy sports events in Murnau akin to the underground 'POW games' in Stalag XII A Langwasser in 1940 [12], or the 'Camp Olympics' in Oflag II C Woldenberg [13] and II D Gross-Born [14]. Nonetheless, the physical activities and sports initiatives undertaken by prisoners at Oflag VII A remain crucial aspects of POW social life, reflecting their determination to uphold physical fitness and readiness for the pursuit of freedom.

The aim of the study was to present the forms of activity of Polish prisoners of war and methods of organising physical culture in Oflag VII A Murnau during The Second World War. The following research questions were formulated:

1. How did the POWs use the existing sports infrastructure to undertake physical activity?
2. How was the organisation of physical culture influenced by the previous experience of POWs, as sports activists, athletes, Olympic athletes?
3. Did physical activity affect the emotional state of the captives during their 6 years of captivity?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The author conducted an exhaustive research of sources across various archives, including the Archive of Modern Records in Warsaw (collections: POW camps 1939–1945, POW camps in Germany, and Military camps collection of files), the Military Historical Office – Central Military Archives in Warsaw (the Cavalry Department of the Ministry of Military Affairs, Order Diaries, and Personal Files), and the Central Museum of Prisoners of War in Łambinowice-Opole (collections: 7th Military District (Murnau Book), Materials and Documents, and Accounts and Memories, the State Archives in Zielona Góra (collection: the Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy, District Board in Zielona Góra from the years [1939] 1950–1989), the Wielkopolskie Museum of Independence in Poznań, the National Library in Warsaw, and the Library of the Museum of Sports and Tourism in Warsaw. Furthermore, the author delved into press archives and magazines, handpicking the most pertinent articles. Of notable significance were the memories of prisoners detained in Oflag VII A Murnau. However, it is worth noting that these accounts were inevitably influenced by the subjectivity of their respective authors.

To enhance the collected data, historical research methodology was employed, predominantly involving analysis, synthesis, and critical examination of primary sources

[15]. Information concerning the daily experiences of prisoners, encompassing sports engagements, were dispersed across multiple institutions. To systematically analyse these materials, the author conducted an investigation aimed at reconstructing events and corroborating historical facts. Subsequently, interpretation took place within the broader context of temporal and spatial conditions. The results obtained enabled a synthetic presentation of the discussed issue based on the heuristic research method [16] and the formulation of final conclusions.

RESULTS

Oflag VII A Murnau was officially established as a German POW camp on 25 September 1939. Situated in the southern part of Upper Bavaria, Murnau was a quaint town nestled in the Alpine foothills, surrounded by three picturesque lakes: Staffelsee, Riegsee, and Froschsee. Renowned for its climatic health resort ambiance, Murnau was situated far away from industrial hubs and major population centres, lying 98 km from Innsbruck, 75 km from Munich, and 25 km from Garmisch-Partenkirchen, the venue for the 1936 Winter Olympic Games [17]. In this truly picturesque location, the Germans set up the largest prisoners of war camps of the Second World War, where for nearly 6 years, approximately 5,500 Polish prisoners, including over 400 privates, were held [18]. The camp was situated in barracks originally intended for artillerymen. The entire area was surrounded by a stone wall, wide and tall barbed wire fences, while along the perimeter there stood 12 special watchtowers equipped with powerful floodlights and guard posts with machine guns, ready to fire. Patrols with dogs guarded the area around the camp [17].

The initial group of prisoners of war arrived in Murnau on 5 October 1939. This contingent comprised approximately 650 officers, among whom were 7 generals, alongside about 250 privates [17]. Over the subsequent weeks and months, this figure steadily increased, significantly straining the housing capacity. The camp found itself accommodating over 5,000 prisoners in buildings originally designed to house 800 to 1,000 Wehrmacht soldiers.



Picture 1. Sports hall on the grounds of Oflag VII A Murnau; Source: Central Museum of Prisoners of War in Łambinowice-Opole.

In the autumn of 1939, none of the prisoners of war confined in Oflag knew how long their captivity would last. Initially buoyed by hope, they awaited England and France to join the war and anticipated victory over Nazi Germany. However, following the capitulation of France and the subsequent triumphs of the German army across all fronts of the Second World War, prospects of liberation dimmed, giving way to pervasive feelings of despondency, sadness, suffering, and depression among the prisoners. These emotional states precipitated what became known as the 'barbed-wire disease,' stemming from prolonged inactivity and a loss of hope for freedom. Instances of suicide, wherein prisoners threw themselves onto the electrified barbed wire surrounding the camp, were regrettably not uncommon [19]. In the face of these challenging conditions of captivity, the prisoners resolved to defy Nazi propaganda and establish a semblance of normalcy within the constraints of the camp, aiming to return to their homeland in good physical and mental health [17]. Drawing upon the provisions outlined in the Geneva Convention, which stipulate *that belligerents shall encourage as much as possible the organisation of intellectual and sporting pursuits by the prisoners of war* (Article 17) [7], efforts were made to construct an internal organisational framework within the camp and offer prisoners diverse forms of engagement, both intellectual and practical.

The Oflag encompassed an area of 7.7 hectares. Situated within former military barracks, the compound comprised three-story residential blocks, an administrative and utility building, and eight brick garages repurposed by prisoners for accommodation. Notably, a sizable glass sports hall measuring 900 square metres with a height of 8 metres was available. This hall was equipped with two gymnastic ladders, one pommel horse, two climbing bars, one trapeze, and two mattresses. Additionally, the hall featured delineated areas for a basketball court and two volleyball courts (Figure 1). While officially designated for Sunday services and mass searches, the hall was extensively utilised by gymnasts, basketball, volleyball, tennis, and table tennis enthusiasts alike [20]. Furthermore, within the confines of the Oflag, there were two squares each measuring 25x35 metres. On one of these squares, four volleyball courts were set up, while the other accommodated a basketball court, a long jump and high jump pit, and a shot-put field (operating until the autumn of 1943). Initially, the parade ground, spanning 80x100 square metres and paved with stones and cobblestones, served as a space for physical exercises and games. However, due to the frequent injuries sustained by prisoners on the unsuitable surface, its utilisation for sporting activities was discontinued [21].

In the subsequent years, new sports facilities, particularly playing fields, were established primarily driven by the initiative of the prisoners and their labour. In mid-1943, the German Camp Command decided to grant the prisoners access to a fire-fighting pool, measuring 19x9 metres and 4 metres in depth. Despite lacking a drainage system and water that was not changed, the prisoners used it as a swimming pool. Overall, the area designated for various forms of sporting activities spanned 1,128 square metres, equating to approximately only 0.27 square metres per officer and 0.69 square metres per officer affiliated with sports clubs. Consequently, the organisation of sporting activities necessitated meticulous logistical efficiency [22].

Sports equipment was indispensable for participating in physical activities. Initially, prisoners resorted to making individual purchases, while those with connections to their families acquired equipment through parcels from Poland. These parcels primarily contained volleyball and basketballs, nets, table tennis balls, sports clothing, and athletic footwear. Subsequently, sports equipment was sourced from donations provided by the English Red Cross. In 1942, the Red Cross dispatched 960 pairs of sports shoes, of which only 150 pairs were allocated to representatives of sports clubs, with the remainder distributed to prisoners whose shoes were in the worst condition [9]. In 1943, several crates of equipment arrived at the Murnau camp from the International Red Cross in Geneva [21]. This shipment included various items, such as table tennis equipment, rings for a game known as deck tennis, three volleyball balls, 53 pairs of boxing gloves, 20 skipping ropes, 27 T-shirts, 66 pairs of shorts, and 122 pairs of sports shoes [22]. Despite

the provision of sports equipment, its distribution among the prisoners was contingent upon the decision of the German Camp Command and typically required considerable effort. However, with the support of the then commandant of the Oflag, Colonel Hugo Oster [23], distribution eventually did take place. When the initial supply of equipment was depleted, prisoners resorted to manufacturing their own. They crafted shorts from sheets and packaging materials from foreign parcels, while nets for games were woven from strings obtained from these parcels. For making game balls, they utilized leather briefcases and boot uppers, the soles of which were already so worn out that they were no longer suitable for use. The prisoners used up 6,000 marks out of a total available expenditure sum of 8,700 marks for the purchase of sports equipment. These funds were sourced from membership fees collected by sports clubs and subsidies provided by the Camp Fund, amounting to 100 marks per month [20].

The first instances of physical activity among POWs in Oflag VII A Murnau took place in the autumn of 1939. Initially, individual gymnastic exercises were undertaken, gradually evolving into larger, albeit still disorganised, group activities. The impetus for these activities primarily came from younger cadets. On 2 December 1939, the first volleyball match was played, utilizing only one ball and a wire stretched between two poles as a makeshift net. Following the winter hiatus, March 1940 saw the inaugural volleyball competition involving three teams, with the first tournament held in May of the same year [22]. As a result of the reorganisation of the POW camp system within the Third Reich, some prisoners were relocated to other camps while a substantial influx of new prisoners arrived in Murnau from various transit camps. These newcomers brought with them the practices and experiences of camp life from previous locations, including those pertaining to physical activity. They formed sports groups bearing names referencing their former places of imprisonment [20]. Consequently, there was a notable resurgence and heightened engagement in sporting activities, undoubtedly buoyed by the arrival of spring and favourable temperatures.

Efforts were made to formalize the sports movement within an organisational framework. The first such initiative occurred on 5 July 1940 with the establishment of the Handball Section. This section was later transformed into the General Camp Sports Committee, incorporating the Handball Section, and expanding its scope of activities. It is worth noting that during this period, what we now recognize as handball was referred to as volleyball, while modern handball was termed "*szczypiorniak*". This is supported by documents archived in the Archive of Modern Records in Warsaw [24] and corroborated by the inventory of sports equipment available to the prisoners. In 1940, there were 11 volleyball balls compared to only 4 designated for handball, and in 1941, the numbers were 33 volleyball balls and just 1 for handball. Therefore, the establishment of a separate handball section was unwarranted, particularly given the popularity of volleyball, which was played predominantly with hands [22].

The Management Board of the General Camp Sports Committee comprised the following individuals: Major Janusz Kapuściński as the sports president, Major Stanisław Koryciński as the administrative president, Second Lieutenant Marian Kliś as the secretary, Second Lieutenant Jerzy Hasselbusch and Second Lieutenant Szmidt in the games department, Second Lieutenant Tadeusz Kołodziejski as the host. Additionally, there were Schneider and Second Lieutenant Leopold Drozdowicz who served as members [3]. Colonel Józef Korycki, the eldest in the camp, established the Sports Care Department on 20 September 1940. This department coordinated all activities, not limited to sports alone, but also encompassing organisational efforts aimed at promoting physical activity and fostering sports development within the camp. Within this department, there existed a Circle of Physical Educators, responsible for initiating training programs for staff in sports such as gymnastics, volleyball, basketball, and football. Furthermore, the Circle disseminated physical education among the broader prisoner population [20].

In the latter part of May 1942, Second Lieutenant Zenon Nonas applied to change the name of the Sports Care Department, arguing that its activities extended beyond the

scope implied by its current name. The General Meeting not only accepted the application but also endorsed the proposed new name – Faculty of Physical Culture [20]. The newly renamed department comprised divisions for various individual sports, a medical division, a referee division, a games and sports division, and a propaganda division. One of the primary responsibilities of the Department was to oversee the activities of the sports clubs [25] within the camp, as well as to cater to all prisoners engaging in sporting activities regardless of their affiliation with clubs [26].

From September 1940 onwards, within just a few months, Oflag witnessed the establishment of 11 sports clubs. These clubs were formed by prisoners of war hailing from one city, such as 'Syrena' (comprising inhabitants of Warsaw), officers belonging to a specific military unit, like 'Barbara' (comprising artillerymen), or originating from a specific transit camp, for instance, 'Kluczbork' which later adopted the name 'Zryw' in February 1941. The remaining clubs were of mixed composition. However, it transpired that three of these clubs, namely 'Lot', 'Ognisko' and 'Strzelcy,' could not withstand the test of time. Consequently, they were disbanded, and their members joined the ranks of the remaining eight clubs. Until the end of the war, sporting activities were carried out by the following clubs, each with its specific colours: 'Barbara' - white shorts and grey T-shirts adorned with the letter B, 'Itaka' - white shorts and black T-shirts featuring the letter I, 'Syrena' - white shorts and red T-shirts embellished with a white mermaid on the chest, 'Wicher' - black shorts and blue T-shirts, 'Zryw' - white shorts and green T-shirts with a red letter Z. Additionally, 'Nadzieja', 'Naprzód,' and 'Spart', whose club colours could not be precisely identified, had distinct emblems: 'Nadzieja' featured a white letter N within a black anchor on a green-blue background, 'Naprzód' showcased a white eagle wearing a crown and holding the letter N in its talons against a grey background, and 'Spart' displayed a navy blue treble clef on a red staff against a white and navy blue background [20].

The naming of the last club has been subject to debate among two authors. Danuta Kisielewicz, in her publications from 1990 [26] and 2015 [9], referred to this sports club as 'Sport,' a designation that appears somewhat illogical. However, Wojciech Półchłopek, in his work from 1997 [27], contested the name 'Spart,' suggesting a typographical error in one of the letters – positing that instead of 'p,' it should be 't,' thus rendering the name 'Start,' or alternatively, if the last letter 'a' was omitted, it would read 'Sparta'. However, both the archival materials housed in the Central Museum of Prisoners of War in Łambinowice-Opole, specifically in the Murnau Book [22], and the records in the Archive of Modern Records in Warsaw [24], including Major Janusz Kapuściński's calligraphy report from 1943, unequivocally identify the club as 'Spart'.

The organisation of sporting activities in Oflag VII A Murnau was structured on models established during the interwar period. Initially, individual sports clubs fell under the jurisdiction of the Department of Sports Care, and later the Department of Physical Culture. The Management Board of the Department, comprising a president, 1st vice-president, 2nd administrative vice-president, secretary, host, treasurer, and heads of departments, was elected annually by the general meeting of delegates from sports clubs. Similarly, sports clubs appointed their own boards with a similar composition to that of the Department of Physical Culture. According to a report from 1943, the total number of individuals associated with these clubs amounted to 1,457 [24]. However, records from the Central Museum of Prisoners of War in Łambinowice-Opole indicate a higher total of 1,648 athletes, with the following breakdown in individual clubs: 'Syrena' – 405 members, 'Wicher' – 293, 'Barbara' – 245, 'Zryw' – 217, 'Itaka' – 167, 'Naprzód' – 137, 'Spart' – 103, and 'Nadzieja' – 81. Nevertheless, there is no precise information available regarding the date when these numbers were taken [22]. It is important to note that many more prisoners engaged in physical activity, as not all participants in daily morning exercises were representatives of these clubs.

The sports season would start at the beginning of April. Camp physicians advised taking full advantage of the alpine air and sunlight to combat winter debilitation and

chronic malnutrition. Capitalizing on these circumstances, the Department of Physical Culture encouraged prisoners to participate in physical activities. They initiated numerous initiatives to provide an enticing array of competitions for more adept athletes, organizing team sports such as basketball, volleyball, football, handball, gymnastics, athletics [23], boxing, tennis, and apparatus gymnastics tournaments [20]. Sporting events often unfolded amidst musical accompaniment; for instance, from 28 to 30 November 1941, a three-day sports celebration was orchestrated within the camp. Gymnastic displays were complemented by the tunes of a jazz orchestra led by Second Lieutenant Feliks Kapala [28].

The evolution of sports was primarily dependent on the available equipment. Although the prisoners enjoyed relatively favourable conditions for engaging in sports within the Murnau camp, they initially lacked the necessary gear (such as sports attire and appropriate footwear). However, as parcels from families and charitable organisations started arriving at the camp, and as the prisoners learned to fashion basic sports equipment themselves, the number of individuals participating in sports steadily increased. Volleyball emerged as the most popular sport, with sections dedicated to it established within every sports club [26]. With the establishment of volleyball courts both outdoors and in the sports hall, regular competitions among teams of three and six players became commonplace. Various tournaments, including championships, friendly matches, intra- and inter-club competitions, as well as inter-block tournaments for non-members, were organised [22].

The other team sports – basketball, football, and handball – were also highly popular, but faced certain limitations. There was only one basketball court and one set of baskets available, which often rendered it inaccessible, since each club typically fielded two basketball teams. Nevertheless, despite these constraints, a total of 350 matches were played [22]. Zenon Różycki, an Olympian from Berlin in 1936, where the Polish team took fourth place, emerged as a leading figure and authority in basketball [29]. Football matches were organized on the parade ground, which was paved with crushed stone and cobblestones. Teams were comprised of players from various clubs, and football garnered



Picture 2. Athletics relay Source: Central Museum of Prisoners of War in Łambinowice-Opole.

significant public interest, with spectators forming a tight perimeter along the outer lines of the pitch. However, due to frequent injuries and shoes wearing out on the rocky terrain, football competitions were discontinued in 1943 [24]. A similar fate befell handball, despite its popularity and nostalgic associations with the First World War it ceased to be played in Murnau [22].

Athletics thrived in Oflag VII A Murnau due to the abundance of sports competitions and the ease of engaging in them. The expansive campgrounds facilitated various running activities. With the supply of specialised sports equipment donated by the International Red Cross in Geneva, facilities for long jump, high jump, and shot put were constructed. These competitions garnered significant support, and several camp records were set and subsequently surpassed during the camp's life. For instance, records were established in long jump (6.43 m), high jump (1.75 m), and shot put (7 kg – 11.17 m, 5 kg – 14.89 m) [27]. The presence of Waław Gassowski, an athlete specializing in 400 and 800 m runs and an Olympian from Berlin in 1936, who arrived in Murnau in 1944 after the Warsaw Uprising, undoubtedly served as a motivating force for the prisoners [29]. Gassowski displayed remarkable dedication to organizing the camp's sporting activities, particularly in the realm of athletic competitions (Figure 2).

Gymnastics in Oflag VII A Murnau encompassed two distinct aspects. Firstly, it served as daily morning or evening individual exercises mandated for all prisoners, aimed at maintaining their health and fitness. This regimen resembled military training [27]. Secondly, gymnastics was pursued as a sport by a smaller group of prisoners. Several specialised groups, each comprising 20 to 30 individuals, engaged in regular exercise sessions. Between 1941 and 1942, eight apparatus and acrobatic gymnastics groups, ranging from 30 to 65 participants each, trained diligently and organized three public shows during this period (Figure 3). The availability of specialised gymnastic equipment in the sports hall and the presence of qualified instructors among the prisoners facilitated these activities [22].



Picture 3. Handrail gymnastics demonstrations; Source: Central Museum of Prisoners of War in Łambinowice-Opole.

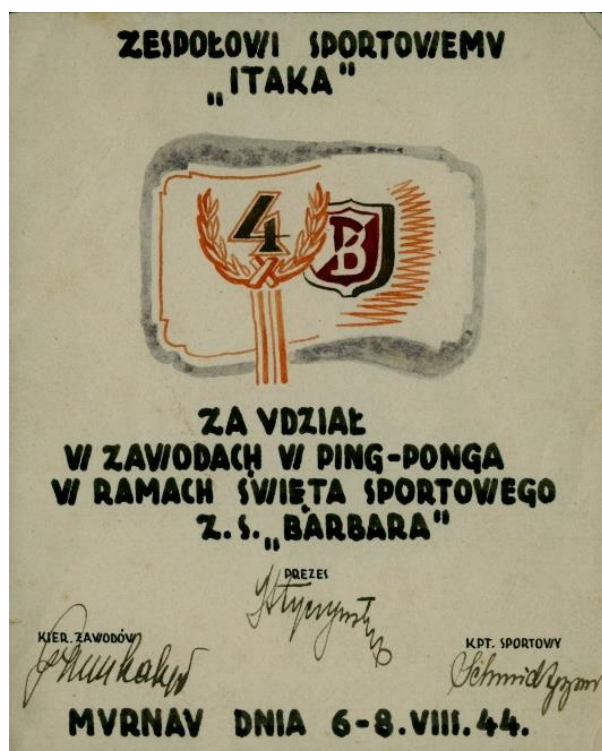
Initially, prisoners at Oflag VII A Murnau had the opportunity to partake in trips to the nearby Riegsee lake, where they engaged in swimming activities. However, following several instances of disobedience by prisoners, swimming in the lake was prohibited [4]. In September 1943, after protracted negotiations, the German Camp Command granted permission for prisoners to utilize the firefighting pool. Adjacent to the pool, the POWs constructed a diving platform, thus facilitating the emergence of swimming as another sport activity. Despite the pool lacking a drainage system and water not being changed, there was considerable enthusiasm for swimming, particularly on warmer days. Swimming lessons and stroke refinement courses were organised, along with various swimming competitions and demonstrations among individual clubs [22]. However, due to significant contamination, the pool was eventually filled in with soil for hygienic reasons [3].

In Oflag VII A Murnau, prisoners of war engaged in three forms of tennis: table tennis, deck tennis, and clay tennis. The availability of equipment was limited, with only one table and a restricted number of balls initially accessible, which were often damaged. The situation somewhat improved in 1943, when the International Red Cross in Geneva dispatched table tennis equipment [22]. However, regular competitions were not established (Figure 4). Deck tennis, also known as 'tennikoit' or 'ring', gained popularity among the prisoners, with rubber disks provided for this game by the International Red Cross. By 1944, it was considered 'the most fashionable sport in the camp' [26]. In the autumn of 1943, tennis matches were initiated on the open surface of the sports hall, which was covered with wooden cubes. Due to the exclusivity of this sport, few prisoners could afford to import costly equipment from outside the camp [20]. Nevertheless, a section dedicated to tennis was established within the 'Wicher' club, while officers from other clubs also engaged in individual play. Two-hour daily training sessions were

conducted, with a total of 56 tennis players participating. However, this sport failed to garner widespread popularity [31].

Many prisoners developed an interest in boxing, despite its physically demanding nature and their weakened state resulting from prolonged captivity and inadequate food rations. With the delivery of boxing gloves from Geneva, several boxing gymnastics and combat courses were organised, each attracting around 50 participants [22]. These courses were led by Walter Majchrzycki, a pre-war light and middleweight boxer who represented the 'Warta' Sports Club from Poznań and competed in the Olympic Games in Amsterdam in 1928 [29].

Outside the structure of the Faculty of Physical Culture, there existed a Chess Club, established in July 1940, which by 1944 boasted 134 members. However, a much larger group of prisoners were interested in chess as a recreational activity.



Picture 4. Diploma for the 'Itaka' Sports Club for participation in the table tennis competition; Source: Archive of New Records in Warsaw.

Most congregated at the chess table for socialisation and relaxation, while those more proficient in the game joined the club [27]. The club possessed several chess sets and two chess clocks. The management board established detailed regulations for competitions, categorised into three classes: C for beginners, B for intermediates, and A for the most advanced players. Advancement to a higher class was granted upon achieving a 70% victory rate. Tournaments were frequently held in the 'pod cebulką' (under the onion) community centre, with organizers providing decorative diplomas crafted by camp artists and book prizes [32]. Major Kłosowski served as the president, actively supported by 2nd Lieutenants Euzebiusz Szeffel and Radzikowski as secretaries. Members of the Officers' Chess Club received intricately handmade ID cards [33]. Through the dedication of the Chess Club members, five issues of the illustrated magazine 'Na Szachownicy' were published, offering professional insights into the sport [3].

In addition to conventional sporting activities, prisoners of war initiated endeavours to recreate aspects of pre-war life within the camp. In August 1944, a new section was established within the Mutual Peer Assistance Fund – the Horse Racing Society. This society organised horse races on Sundays and holidays, including a grand derby twice a year. Prisoners participated in the competition using cardboard horses crafted within the camp. Making bets was permitted, with 10% of the proceeds being allocated to charitable causes such as the Aid Fund for Internees [19], the Posthumous Fund (supporting families of deceased prisoners), and the Widows and Orphans Fund. Despite the camp's challenging circumstances, the POW community demonstrated extraordinary generosity by endeavouring to assist their families and fellow prisoners. A portion of the proceeds from each sporting or artistic event held in Oflag VII A Murnau was dedicated to these causes. However, in 1943, the German camp command prohibited the transfer of funds outside the camp [30].

The structure of the Department of Physical Culture comprised the Training Department and the Propaganda Department. The former was tasked with all matters related to prepare staff to conduct physical exercises, physical education, and sporting activities. It organised training sessions for managers, sports activists, teachers, and members of sports clubs across various sports. These were courses for instructors in volleyball, football, basketball, physical activities, athletics, gymnastics, sports massage, first aid [24], as well as advanced courses for physical education teachers, sports referees, boxing, swimming, and national dances [22]. Despite challenging conditions and the lack of appropriate teaching facilities or written materials, training and examinations were conducted for 183 officers by 20 August 1943 [24]. The qualifications acquired in the Oflags were later recognised by the sports authorities of the People's Republic of Poland following the end of the war.

The Propaganda Department's goal (...) *was to generate interest in and promote all branches of sports among all officers, utilizing the resources available within the camp* [24]. In July 1941, a sports revue titled 'Na start' was organised in the theatre room in garage block D. The program featured a national dance showcase, an exhibition boxing match, and a sports march performance – a routine choreographed by Capt. Knaś to the lyrics of cf. Kwast: (...) *'just as sport strengthens the muscles, music ennobles the soul. The strength of the body and the ennobled soul create a beautiful harmony'* [20]. Such sports events and shows were held multiple times and consistently garnered significant interest, serving as motivation for individuals to engage in physical activity. Additionally, talks and readings on various sport-related topics, such as *The Contemporary Concept of Sport, Sport and Personality, the Olympics, and Profiles of Great Athletes*, were organised. Given the limited availability of specialised sports literature in the camp library, these discussions held significant importance, especially considering that the speakers were eminent authorities in their respective fields [24]. Among the lecturers was 1936 Olympian and cavalry rider – captain Janusz Komorowski [34].

The largest sports event in Murnau was the Physical Fitness Test, organised in June and July 1943 for all officers in the camp [24]. It was a solemn affair, as the competition was inaugurated by the Oldest of the Camp, Maj. Gen. Juliusz Rómmel, who encouraged all participants to partake and pass the test [20]. Spanning two months, the test comprised five events: long jump, high jump, shot put, 800 or 300 m run, and a 5 km walk (Figure 5). A total of 1,068 prisoners (approximately 1/5 of the camp's population) volunteered for the test and were divided into eight age groups, each with defined performance standards for every competition. Ultimately, 47% of the registered participants completed the Physical Fitness Test with all five events, with 904 making the long jump and 504 prisoners completing the 5 km walk [22].



Picture 5. Sports competition in the shot put; Source: Central Museum of Prisoners of War in Łambinowice-Opole

The competition held significant propaganda value, demonstrating to both participants and spectators that despite the dire living conditions in the camp, it was possible to maintain physical fitness and readiness to strive for freedom in the future.

During the war, the Olympic Games were scheduled to take place twice. According to the Olympic cycle, in 1940, the Olympic athletes were set to compete in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in winter, in Helsinki in summer, and in 1944 in London and Cortina d'Ampezzo [35]. Even though the ancient principle of *Ekekheiria* 'Olympic Truce' was not upheld in the modern world, and the war did not stop in order to allow for the games, the prisoners in Oflag VII A Murnau did not forget about this extraordinary sporting event. During the Olympic years of 1940 and 1944, they organised ceremonial sports shows, featuring gymnastics, running, football, parallel bars, and horizontal bar exercises [17]. However, the prisoners did not give them

Olympic symbolism, as was the case in Stalag Langwasser and in the Oflags in Woldenberg and Gross-Born [36].

CONCLUSION

Oflag VII A Murnau was one of the largest Nazi camps for Polish prisoners of war, accommodating approximately 5,500 Polish officers. Initially, the camp housed soldiers from the September Campaign, followed by transfers from other camps, and in October 1944, participants of the Warsaw Uprising. It operated as a Polish camp state, where the prisoners established a hierarchical organisational structure led by the Senior Camp Leader and the Camp's Chief Trustee. Within this framework, 24 central administrative units were identified, including Scientific Courses, Allotment Gardens, Care for Widows and Orphans, Loss Commission, Infirmary, Library, Post Office, Payer's Office, Bookstore, Theatre, Cinema, Notary, Court of Honor, Main Canteen, Aid Store Peer Group, Distribution of Foreign Parcels, Choir, Orchestra, Physical Education, Kitchen, Fire Brigade, Hairdresser, Bookbinding Shop, and the Historical Committee. These central units had their block equivalents [19].

Despite the challenging conditions of captivity, prisoners at Oflag VII A Murnau took effective measures to facilitate engagement in physical activity and sports competitions, thereby maintaining physical fitness. One of the significant advantages of the

camp was the satisfactory condition of sports facilities, as the camp was housed in barracks originally built for the German army. Additionally, the officers interned at the camp, many of whom were educators, coaches, sports enthusiasts, and even Olympic athletes, possessed a high level of awareness. They played a pivotal role as the main initiators of sporting activities within the camp.

The Sports Care Department, later transformed into the Department of Physical Culture, served as the central coordinator for all physical activity-related initiatives. Under its supervision, eight sports clubs were established, encompassing a total of 10 sports. Among the most popular were volleyball, basketball, athletics, gymnastics (including instrumental and acrobatic gymnastics), boxing, football, handball, swimming, table tennis, deck tennis (ringo), and court tennis. Additionally, the chess club operated independently outside the department's purview. Through diligent efforts, the department organised regular sports competitions, tournaments, and shows, significantly contributing to the popularisation of physical activity among all prisoners. This concerted effort played a crucial role in maintaining the relatively good health and physical fitness of officers. As a result, many of them, upon the liberation of Oflag by Allied troops on 29 April 1945, were prepared to actively participate in efforts to reclaim their homeland.

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